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SUBJECT: WILL ELECTORAL GREMLINS THWART ELECTION DAY?

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN L. WITHERS II FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) During a meeting with Ambassador, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission, Arben Ristani, brushed aside many concerns or difficulties involved with implementing the new Electoral Code, saying that his main worries were over the election's budget and with the lists of party delegates who would serve on the Electoral Commissions. According to Ristani, in the past the parties change these names several times in the lead up to the elections, making it difficult to have trained, capable individuals ready for Election Day.

¶2. (C) More interestingly, Ristani said he feared the real problems would start when the counting begins. Warning that trust is the most lacking element in the electoral system, he said that if one side senses it is losing in a particular region, it could do something as simple as hide the official "wet seal," making the ballots ineligible to be counted. He said this type of behavior has occurred in the past as the party that senses it is losing starts to "act crazy" and begins fistfights, steals things, and causes mayhem. In 2007, for example, he said one community held elections three times but each time the results had to be voided because the losing side kept breaking open the ballot box, thereby voiding all the ballots. The political climate, according to Ristani, is largely to blame for this behavior; however he also blamed the Prosecutor's Office because it has never prosecuted any of these electoral miscreants. Finally, he expects that counting on Election Day could begin around 2200 or 2300 in a best case scenario.

¶3. (C) Comment: Ristani, well traveled and highly educated, was put in place by the DP. While he knows who his benefactor is, he does seem committed to a fair process. His concerns about chaos in the counting centers are telling and could indicate that with all the focus on the flawed ID card process, other issues are being ignored. Indeed, Ristani never even mentioned ID cards. SP officials have admitted that the ID cards are taking up most of their time even though they have serious concerns about nearly the entire voting and counting process. It is also noteworthy that something as simple as a missing "wet seal" or, more seriously, hooligans breaking ballot boxes, could potentially void many votes. These will no doubt add to the already inevitable controversies that will surround the counting process. It is liable to be a long night on June 28.

WITHERS